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ABSTRACT

The Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) approach has provided many corporations with a tool for adapting to ongoing shifts in demands and resources, and it can offer academic settings similar assistance. CQI offers a mechanism for building a collaborative process that can help departments define their unique strengths and cultivate a distinctive niche. The CQI process begins by identifying specifically what consumers want from an academic organization. The approach assumes that departments will continue to confront an array of student needs and preferences. By orienting all employees to view program improvement as a vital part of their jobs, the CQI approach operates proactively. CQI makes heavy use of benchmarking. This involves determining optimal performance in any specific area and detailing how that level of performance can best be achieved. Action plans are developed. Ongoing monitoring is central. Consideration of the specific consequences of program improvement initiatives is also key to CQI. Statistical process control is used to discern actual changes and distinguish these from random fluctuations. The paper also describes the use of CQI at Ursinus College, Pennsylvania, where the focus was on student achievement. An appendix contains a sample outcomes assessment that summarizes student research achievement from 1980 to 2002. (SLD)

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Making Departments Distinctive:

The Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Mindset

ED 479 751

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Introduction

Challenges confronting academic departments today demand that we frame change in positive terms. The Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) approach has provided many corporations with a tool for adapting to ongoing shifts in demands and resources (Dumas, 1987). It can offer academic settings similar assistance. CQI concepts offer a useful foundation for department chairs being challenged to respond to changing pressures in the academic environment. It offers a mechanism for building a collaborative process that can help departments define their unique strengths and cultivate a distinctive niche.

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The CQI process begins by identifying specifically what consumers want from an academic organization. Consumers include the students, their parents, prospective graduate programs alumni will attend, prospective employers of alumni, and other parties served by the educational institution. The department next considers various ways of conceptualizing quality, and develops a consensus that will help to reframe ambitions. This fosters a more collaborative approach to enhancing departmental achievement. Departmental processes can then be restructured as needed in order to facilitate the planning and execution of a continuous stream of improvements. Emphasis is placed on involving all departmental members, including non-faculty staff. Non-faculty staff often offer invaluable insights into how the department is perceived by students, and whether a coherent departmental message is being projected externally within the institution.

This approach assumes that departments will continue to confront a changing array of student needs and preferences. By defining the task of optimizing the group's response to these shifting demands as one of the most interesting parts of the work being done within the department, CQI fosters the redefining of change as a welcome challenge, rather than a threat.

There are several concepts central to the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) mindset. It is useful to consider these key ideas before considering how these concepts can be applied in academic contexts. The historical underpinnings of this approach date back to the work W.Edwards Deming, who emphasized the need for detailed goal setting and measurement of outcomes (McLaughlin & Kaluzny, 1994). He introduced the use of rigorous statistical analysis of objective data to monitor quality within organizations. Deming conceived of institutional growth as arising from a continuous cycle of refinements and improvement based on data. Rather than emphasizing individual performance improvement, he saw the value of focusing on institutional

processes.

The CQI approach is highly inclusive. It emphasizes shared responsibility for quality control within organizations (Scholtes, 1988). By orienting all employees to view program improvement as a vital part of their jobs, the CQI approach operates proactively. Rather than wait for institutional nightmares to develop (e.g., dramatic rises in student attrition, recruitment reductions, budget overruns), organizations emphasize the importance of spotting problems with processes early on, before they become terribly dangerous to the ambitions of the institution.

The risk of such an approach is that it could foster defensiveness on the part of employees being seen as more responsible for institutional progress. To reduce this risk, CQI tempers this potential threat by describing problems in impersonal terms, as "systems failures" rather than as individual's failures. By deemphasizing individual "culprits", this approach facilitates more open and honest inquiries, and focuses more on future prevention rather than allocating blame for past missteps. Most individuals function far more productively when freed from the need to protect their reputations from those they experience as critical and attacking (Chambliss 1988; Chambliss, 2000). This reassuring focus also makes it far easier for employees to discuss problems they are encountering in their work.

CQI makes heavy use of benchmarking. This involves determining optimal performance in any specific area and detailing how that level of performance can best be achieved. Action plans are developed, which offer step-by-step guidelines that employees make a commitment to follow, including specific measurable objectives to be achieved by particular dates. In academic settings that emphasize student achievement outcomes, for instance, it is useful to work jointly with faculty to arrive at definitions of optimal student transformation. Students' participation in

successful study abroad experiences, independent research, internships, etc. might provide one way of measuring desired outcomes (assuming that previous research indicates that such experiences reliability mark successful transformation). Specific strategies for increasing the number of students participating in such programs could be developed (e.g., enhancing available options, publicizing available opportunities, facilitating financial support for such programs, publicizing successful ventures, etc.). Deadlines for interim goals can be set, which allows all participants in the process to monitor progress and make necessary adjustments in their approach.

Ongoing monitoring is central to CQI because it permits mid-program corrections. Some of this can be done informally, through meetings with members of working groups to review key measures of program effectiveness. For example, in assessing ways of enhancing an on-campus summer research program, administrative participants can review the quality of PowerPoint presentations prepared by students at the end of the program, as well as student and faculty program satisfaction survey data. Participants can review data detailing attendance levels at all the summer programs, and consider ways of building or maintaining enthusiasm and support for such endeavors in the future. Application and acceptance rates can be compared for several years, in order to assess whether the program continues to build interest and support. Ways of enhancing funding can be actively pursued.

Consideration of the specific consequences of program improvement initiatives is also key to CQI. In addition to anticipated, welcome consequences (e.g., increases in the number of students publishing their work [see Appendix 1], gaining admission into graduate schools, or obtaining competitive grants and fellowships), CQI reserves time to examine unintended consequences, both favorable and unfavorable. Dramatic improvements in one academic

department may create a harmful backlash elsewhere. Temporary diversion of resources to enhance a languishing program may create perceived imbalances and destructive accusations of favoritism. Acceptance of the inevitability of such unintended consequences permits accurate detection of them, and affords the opportunity to take appropriate corrective action.

Statistical process control is used by practitioners of CQI to discern actual changes and distinguish these from random fluctuations in the outcome measures being collected. Without appropriate statistical analyses, shifts which fall within the normal deviation range may be mistaken for true changes. The scientific management approach advocated by the CQI orientation uses data systematically to aid the decision making process. For instance, shallow dips in the numbers of students presenting their research at conferences over the course of a couple of semesters would not signal the same thing as a dramatic, aberrant drop in the number of students enrolling in research courses. The former shifts fall within the standard deviation of the measure in question, while the latter represents a more reliable indication of change.

Given the centrality of data collection to the CQI method, several techniques for monitoring progress and outcomes within academic departments can be of value. Since most faculty members are very familiar with using resumes as a means of making individual productivity visible and clear, institution of a Departmental Vita is often helpful. Departmental members can collaborate in selecting relevant accomplishments to track ongoing departmental achievement. Procedures for regularly updating this collective record of achievement can be developed, and electronic dissemination can make access quite convenient. Such a tool helps to keep all departmental members informed about the group's progress. It can also be very useful in recruiting new faculty and students to the department.

At Ursinus College, a small, selective liberal arts college located northwest of Philadelphia, we used a process of continuous quality improvement at the department level in order to enhance our success. Using a participative continuous quality improvement orientation, after clarifying the expectations of students within our target audience, we sought to develop processes that would help to maximize our ability to provide students with experiences that would consistently meet or exceed these expectations.

One illustrative initiative involved the adoption of a "campaign" mindset, whereby increasing student achievement was made the centerpiece of the decision-making process. In various settings, decision-making groups returned to the student achievement criteria in evaluating potential changes. "How will this change serve to increase our students' achievement?" became the question that organized many separate groups' deliberations about issues as diverse as curriculum, student life, enrollment policy, field house design, and judicial hearings and readmission proceedings. This shared objective helped to foster a consensus in many contexts that would otherwise have been stymied by fractious contentiousness.

Another set of changes involved the processes used in new faculty hiring and assimilation. Several measures were taken to improve upon how positions were allocated, the selection process, and the first year indoctrination. Changing the experiences of new faculty is one of the most efficient means of enhancing quality throughout the institution. However, care must be taken not to create a divided faculty, with tensions between junior and senior members.

Campaigning for Student Achievement

One of the most pivotal changes on our campus involved the explicit central positioning of student achievement. Although all academic institutions obviously value students and their

accomplishments, our college and department concluded that our success in facilitating student achievement was the optimal way for us to conceptualize quality. Promoting widespread public endorsement of a common "bottom line" ("Are we improving student achievement?"), through planned discussions about how to link institutional priorities and revised faculty evaluation criteria, appears to have increased individual productivity, student productivity, and support for the efforts of others. Team spirit is often enhanced when participants have the opportunity to articulate how their individual successes foster the common good. Our ongoing dialogue also permitted faculty to develop better ways of learning from one another's experiences with various solutions to the shared problem of increasing student outcomes while holding resources constant.

Staffing Evolution

Selecting, orienting, and supervising new faculty members optimally can profoundly affect the quality of an academic institution. It is often easier to shape the expectations and productivity of newly hired colleagues than it is to help experience faculty members adjust to "the rising bar". New faculty members can have a substantial impact on morale and aspirations within departments. These changes, in turn, can make it easier to attract ever more capable individuals to the institution, yielding a spiraling process of quality improvement. Therefore, investing substantial energy in new faculty members' development is clearly justified. Providing them with involvement in the CQI process early on helps to maximize their ability to contribute to the department.

Within our department, as we have incorporated several new faculty members, we have found it very helpful to link increasing scholarly expectations of faculty to our ongoing commitment to continuous program improvement and the allied emphasis on improving student outcomes. Priority is given to research activities that are integrated with the faculty member's role

as mentor to students. Collaborative involvement of students in research projects is recognized as a premier form of professional activity, and presenting and publishing papers coauthored with students is explicitly valued. Faculty work with one another to specify activities that help to achieve particular student outcomes. Colleagues pool efforts to help maximize certain desired outcomes (e.g., faculty members attend different research conferences, so that large numbers of students can be escorted to a variety of venues, instead of all attending the same conference). Since even the best faculty will fail if they are unwilling or ill equipped to develop new technology skills themselves, new and experienced faculty collaborate in sharing these skills. Technology has made interactions less formal, thereby transforming relationships so they become less adversarial. Technology has also greatly facilitated collaborative research and writing among both faculty and students.

The greatest contribution that CQI makes may lie in its establishment of an entrenched habit of regularly assessing the efficiency and efficacy of particular departmental activities. This assessment provides valuable feedback, detection of imminent problems while they are easier to address, and a mechanism for celebrating progress. Ongoing outcomes assessment using student impact as the prime criterion alerts departments both to useful and harmful changes occurring within the institution. Academic departments can be significantly enhanced through the articulation of clear, measurable goals, and a commitment to scientific analysis of outcome measures. An ethos of optimism, enthusiasm, and ownership can be fostered, which increases the satisfaction of all participants within the department. The reassurance that processes will be continuously revisited and reviewed offers a sense of protection against feelings of resignation when frustrations are encountered. Institutions whose processes are continually responsive to the

shifting needs of those they serve are most likely to survive and thrive in our increasingly competitive environment.

Appendix 1
Sample Outcomes Assessment
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
URSINUS COLLEGE
STUDENT RESEARCH ACHIEVEMENT

Year	# student presentations	Students at least once	# student presenters	# student publications	Students at least once	# student publishers
1980	0	0	0	0	0	0
1981	0	0	0	0	0	0
1982	0	0	0	0	0	0
1983	0	0	0	0	0	0
1984	1	2	2	0	0	0
1985	1	1	1	0	0	0
1986	0	0	0	0	0	0
1987	0	0	0	1	1	1
1988	1	1	1	1	1	1
1989	0	0	0	1	1	1
1990	4	4	7	5	6	6
1991	8	8	10	4	6	6
1992	15	18	19	7	10	10
1993	18	15	25	4	7	7
1994	22	31	34	9	17	17
1995	30	49	57	8	19	24
1996	31	55	76	10	24	32
1997	33	40	63	12	21	31
1998	33	54	55	16	28	67
1999	27	46	65	15	30	55
2000	28	50	83	13	36	41
2001	32	45	63	13	31	34
2002	33	51	71	14	32	47

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